



Where the Love Light Gleams by a little more light

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B., Will B.

Pairings: J. Hopper/Joyce B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-25 06:03:34

Updated: 2017-12-25 06:03:34

Packaged: 2019-12-17 03:19:41

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,181

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After everything that's happened, Hopper just wants a quiet Christmas Eve, Joyce doesn't want to be alone, and El's learned enough to know that Christmas means being there for the people you love. One-shot, basically just Byers-Hopper family fluff.

Where the Love Light Gleams

As Hopper is leaving for work on the morning of December 23rd, El taps him on the arm.

"You forgot the presents." She hands him the brightly-decorated bag.

She's made it her business to learn everything she can about Christmas, adding words like 'tradition' and 'merry' to her everyday vocabulary, and insisting that they get gifts for all of their friends. The day after the Snow Ball, she presented him with a list of ideas that was several pages long, even with her limited handwriting. He managed to get her down to one easily-concealed item for each person, to fit in a bag to give to Joyce, with the idea that Will could pass along the rest to Mike and the others.

He takes the bag from her. "Right."

"When you give it to Joyce . . ."

"I'll signal you, and you can watch them open their presents." That's been the most important part of this to her; she wants to see her friends smile. She's counting the days until the year is up and she can see them regularly, instead of having to plan the rare visit down to the most minute detail in case someone's watching.

"Good," she says with a nod. "She will like her present?"

"I think so. You said something pretty, and it's pretty."

She'd wanted 'something pretty' for both Joyce and Nancy. Unsure of exactly what that entailed, he ended up getting an ornately-painted mug for Joyce and a scarf for Nancy. El wrapped them both like they were treasures, and told him she approved.

"I'll see you tonight, kid," he says, and heads out the door.

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He'd let Joyce know he had something to drop off after work. She answers the door pretty quickly, and all but pulls him inside,

muttering something about the cold.

He holds up the bag. "From El. Small presents for everyone. Will can give the rest to his friends."

"Oh, thank you!" she says, taking it from him. "Wow, heavy."

"Yeah." He looks around. "Where are the boys?"

"Picking up a pizza, since we're doing so much cooking tomorrow."

"Oh."

She frowns. "Something wrong?"

He just shrugs. "El wanted to see you open them."

"Is she watching?" Joyce looks around the room. The lamp in the corner flickers off and on again, and she flinches, but quickly covers it up with a smile and a wave. "Hi, sweetie." She looks back up at Hopper. "You should come for dinner tomorrow. She can watch us open them then."

"Oh, no," he says, shaking his head. "I promised her triple-decker Eggo extravaganzas, and—"

"—and she's very serious about promises," Joyce finishes. "Well, how about after?"

They're supposed to be lying low, for God's sake. He sighs. "Look, Joyce, I just want a quiet night, and—"

"So do we," she says, persistent. "We're going to make hot chocolate and watch whatever Christmas movie's on TV. No crazy group of kid friends running around, I promise."

He takes this to mean '*the Wheeler boy won't be around*,' which he's grateful for. It's not that Mike's a bad kid, it's just that keeping an eye on teenage romance is hardly Hopper's definition of a peaceful night.

"Please?" Joyce says.

Something in her eyes tells him this goes beyond just a friendly invitation. She's put on a happy face of enjoying the holiday, but he knows she's still struggling to keep herself together. They all are, after everything that's happened, but she lost someone she loved. She needs someone to be here for her.

On the safety side of things, he still wants to say no. But damn it, she's asked him while El's watching, and he can't say no to both of them.

He almost suggests that she and the boys come to visit him and El, but then thinks that if anyone is watching, her driving into the woods on Christmas Eve would seem more suspicious than him dropping by for a visit. After all, that's become a regular occurrence.

"I'll talk to El," he says. "And if she wants to—"

"You know she will. Let's say eight-thirty?"

"If she wants to, then maybe."

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"I want to go," El says the minute he walks through the door.

"Jesus, kid, at least let me get to my dinner."

"Joyce is sad. I saw her face." El follows him to the sink as he washes his hands, and then to the table. "We all have nightmares, even you. We should be there for them. Like a family, for Christmas."

She says this so emphatically that he wonders if she rehearsed it. No doubt watching every single Christmas-related thing that's been on TV in the past few weeks has helped. There've been times where he's almost been annoyed by it, but then he thinks of the dark rooms she's spent most of her life in, and he can't be anything but happy about her taking in all of the joy and light that she can.

Still, he takes a few bites of his food before he speaks.

"All right. We'll go. Now eat your dinner."

"Thank you!"

She even eats the peas without complaint, and he finds himself wishing the holiday came more than once a year.

Later, just before she goes to bed, she stops to tell him, "We should bring them something. Those striped . . . Christmas hooks. The food." She makes the shape with her finger.

"Candy canes," he says.

"Candy canes," she repeats.

She's seen them on TV, but she hasn't had any yet. He might as well get a box for all of them. "Sure, kid. I'll stop after work tomorrow."

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When they arrive, Joyce opens the door almost immediately after they ring the bell. She greets them with a smile and a, "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," El says, moving to hug her.

Joyce squeezes her tightly. "Good to see you again, sweetie." She moves toward Hopper, and for a moment seems like she's going to hug him, too, but she stops and turns back to El. "There's hot chocolate in the kitchen, and Jonathan made cookies."

El nods happily and heads inside. Joyce looks up at Hopper. The smile is still on her face, but her eyes are sad.

"Hey, Hop. Thanks for . . ." She trails off. "Come inside."

When he has, and the door has closed behind him, he hands her the box of candy canes. "El really wanted to bring something for you."

"Oh, how sweet!" she says, and then laughs at her unintended pun. "Thank you both. Come on."

She leads him to the kitchen, where the kids are already munching cookies while Jonathan pours mugs of hot chocolate. He nods in

greeting, and Will says, "Hey, Hopper," in between bites of his cookie.

"Hey. Merry Christmas."

"I like this tradition," El says, grabbing another cookie.

They stay in the kitchen for a little while, chatting and eating cookies, and then Will asks El if she wants to do presents. She says yes, so they all gather in front of the tree.

El watches with the biggest smile on her face as the Byers open the presents she wrapped for them, and somehow the smile widens when they each thank her. And then, when he sees the look of surprise on El's face as Joyce hands her a box, Hopper wonders if she might just float up over the moon.

"For me?" she asks.

"Yes. I know it's not much, but I didn't want anyone to be suspicious," Joyce says, looking at Hopper for the final part.

He gives her a nod. "Can't be too careful."

"Thank you," El breathes, holding the box with a look of reverent wonder.

"You can open it, you know," Will says with a laugh.

"Yeah, that's what presents are for," says Jonathan.

"Right."

She opens it slowly, careful not to rip the paper, and pulls out a soft sweater that looks like something Joyce might buy for herself, if it weren't for the deep shade of pink.

"Pretty," El breathes, stroking it. "And soft. Thank you!"

She moves to hug them all in turn, Joyce and Will smiling, and Jonathan looking surprised for a moment before returning the hug. "Merry Christmas," he tells her.

After Hopper's opened his present (a mug painted with the words 'coffee and contemplation' - apparently done by Will at Joyce's suggestion), they all return to the kitchen for more hot chocolate and candy canes, and then settle in front of the TV to watch whatever Christmas movie they can find.

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They catch the last few minutes of *Miracle on 34th Street*, which, thankfully, El has already seen, and she spends most of those few minutes whispering with Will on the floor. Then after flipping through a few more channels, Jonathan finds the beginning of *It's a Wonderful Life*, which El has not seen, and she goes silent, sitting mesmerized through the whole thing.

When the movie ends, Hopper glances at his watch. "Well, I guess that's our cue to—"

"Hey, Mom?" Will says quickly, looking at Joyce. "When El and I were talking earlier, we decided we should make Christmas cards for everyone." He sees Joyce start to look at the clock, and quickly adds, "If that's okay."

Joyce just looks at Hopper, who looks at El, who's looking at him with a hopeful expression. "Can I stay?" she asks.

He sighs, and thinks, *What the hell, it's Christmas*. "One hour," he tells her. "Then we have to go."

"Thank you!" she says, and rushes off with Will.

Jonathan, sitting in the chair across from Hopper and Joyce, stays for the beginning of the next movie. He mostly looks at the TV, but every so often looks back at the two of them, fidgeting with his hands. After a while he stands and gives Joyce a smile. "I'm gonna head to bed, Mom. You know Will'll want to be up early for presents."

"Okay, hon," she says, looking up at him to smile back. "Merry Christmas."

"Yeah, merry Christmas. 'Night, Hopper."

"Night."

So Hopper and Joyce sit, somewhat enjoying the movie, mainly enjoying the sound of Will and El's happy chatter.

"Thank you for coming," Joyce says. She's looking at the TV, but the emotion is evident on her face.

"Thanks for the invitation," he replies. "I know El's happy to be out of the house again."

"Yeah. And it's good for Will to have someone who . . . understands."

"Is he doing all right?" Hopper asks out of habit, even though he knows the answer.

"Things are better than last time," she says slowly. "We know what we're dealing with now, but we all still have our bad nights. And our bad days, really."

He nods. "El, too." He leaves out the 'me, too' part of it, because she's got enough to worry about.

She turns to look him in the eyes, clearly seeing right through him. "We'll be okay," she says, in a way that he knows means *I'm here for you*. He smiles to let her know he appreciates it, and she turns back to the TV. "We've all got each other. We'll all be okay."

She pulls a blanket off the back of the couch and wraps herself in it, and leans her head against his shoulder.

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When El comes back into the room an hour later, Christmas cards in hand, she finds Hopper and Joyce fast asleep on the couch. Hopper is leaning back, and Joyce is leaning into him, with a blanket wrapped tightly around her. There's a different black-and-white movie on the TV, one El hasn't seen yet, and she watches for a few minutes before Will walks up next to her.

He looks at Hopper and Joyce for a few moments, and then quietly says, "You can take my bed. I'll put some blankets on the floor for

myself."

She nods. "Thank you."

She watches as he turns off the TV and whispers, "Night, Mom." He heads back to his room, but El lingers for a minute, smiling at the two figures on the couch.

She knows they both have been struggling since . . . since everything happened, trying to help their kids while coping with their own nightmares. But sitting there, asleep, the two of them look peaceful (one of her new Christmas words) and warm.

And in the quiet of this house with these people she loves, she feels peaceful and warm, too.

"Merry Christmas," she whispers, and heads to bed.

This was written over the course of about two hours, so it's . . . rough, to say the least. I just really wanted to get something done for Christmas.